

Rules of the Game

Familiars (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Managing a familiar can prove taxing for DMs and players alike. Exactly how vulnerable is a familiar during combat? What can the master do to protect the familiar? What happens to the familiar when the master and familiar must enter a dangerous environment together, such as traversing a fiery corridor or going underwater? Exactly what can the familiar communicate with the master?

We'll examine all these questions, and a few more, in this series. Much of the material in this series is drawn from the familiars section of [Tome & Blood](#), which Bruce Cordell and I wrote. Material taken from *Tome & Blood* has been updated to fit the current **D&D** game rules.



This month, we solicited questions on this topic via the message boards ([on this thread](#)). Thanks to all those players who took the time to ask questions, and be sure to look for future Rules of the Game threads.

Familiar Basics

The sidebar on pages 52-54 of the *Player's Handbook* details a familiar's abilities and the advantages it brings to the master. Here's an overview, along with a few comments and clarifications. All the following traits and features apply to a familiar for as long as it remains a familiar -- that is, for as long as the familiar and the master are both alive and the master has not chosen to dismiss the familiar.

From pages 52-54 of the *Player's Handbook*:

FAMILIARS

Familiars are magically linked to their masters. In some sense, the familiar and the master are practically one being. That's why, for example, the master can cast a personal range spell on a familiar even though he can normally cast such a spell only on himself. A familiar is a normal animal that gains new powers and becomes a magical beast when summoned to service by a sorcerer or wizard. It retains the appearance, Hit Dice, base attack bonus, base save bonuses, skills, and feats of the normal animal it once was, but it is treated as a magical beast instead of an animal for the purpose of any effect that depends on its type. Only a normal, unmodified animal may become a familiar. Thus, a druid/sorcerer can't use her animal companion as a familiar.

A familiar also grants special abilities to its master (a sorcerer or wizard), as given on the table below.

These special abilities apply only when the master and familiar are within 1 mile of each other.

Levels of different classes that are entitled to familiars (such as sorcerer and wizard) stack for the purpose of determining any familiar abilities that depend on the master's level.

Familiar Special

Bat	Master gains a +3 bonus on Listen checks
Cat	Master gains a +3 bonus on Move Silently checks
Hawk	Master gains a +3 bonus on Spot checks in bright light
Lizard	Master gains a +3 bonus on Climb checks
Owl	Master gains a +3 bonus on Spot checks in shadows
Rat	Master gains a +2 bonus on Fortitude saves
Raven ¹	Master gains a +3 bonus on Appraise checks
Snake ²	Master gains a +3 bonus on Bluff checks
Toad	Master gains +3 hit points
Weasel	Master gains a +2 bonus on Reflex saves

¹ A raven familiar can speak one language of its master's choice as a supernatural ability.

² Tiny viper.

Familiar Basics: Use the basic statistics for a creature of the familiar's kind, as given in the *Monster Manual*, but make the following changes:

Hit Dice: For the purpose of effects related to number of Hit Dice, use the master's character level or the familiar's normal HD total, whichever is higher.

Hit Points: The familiar has one-half the master's total hit points (not including temporary hit points), rounded down, regardless of its actual Hit Dice. For example, at 2nd level, Hennessey has 9 hit points, so his familiar has 4.

Attacks: Use the master's base attack bonus, as calculated from all his classes. Use the familiar's Dexterity or Strength modifier, whichever is greater, to get the familiar's melee attack bonus with natural weapons. Damage equals that of a normal creature of the familiar's kind.

Saving Throws: For each saving throw, use either the familiar's base save bonus (Fortitude +2, Reflex +2, Will +0) or the master's (as calculated from all his classes), whichever is better. The familiar uses its own ability modifiers to saves, and it doesn't share any of the other bonuses that the master might have on saves (from magic items or feats, for example).

Skills: For each skill in which either the master or the familiar has ranks, use either the normal skill ranks for an animal of that type or the master's skill ranks, whichever are better. In either case, the familiar uses its own ability modifiers. Regardless of a familiar's total skill modifiers, some skills (such as Craft) may remain beyond the familiar's ability to use.

Familiar Ability Descriptions: All familiars have special abilities (or impart abilities to their masters) depending on the master's combined level in classes that grant familiars, as shown on the table below. The abilities given on the table are cumulative.

Natural Armor Adj.: The number noted here is an improvement to the familiar's existing natural armor bonus. It represents the preternatural toughness of a spellcaster's familiar.

Int: The familiar's Intelligence score. Familiars are as smart as people, though not necessarily as smart as smart people.

Alertness (Ex): The presence of the familiar sharpens its master's senses. While a familiar is within arm's reach, the master gains the Alertness feat (page 89).

Improved Evasion (Ex): When subjected to an attack that normally allows a Reflex saving throw for half damage, a familiar takes no damage if it makes a successful saving throw and half damage even if the saving throw fails.

Share Spells: At the master's option, he may have any spell (but not any spell-like ability) he casts on himself also affect his familiar. The familiar must be within 5 feet at the time of casting to receive the benefit. If the spell or effect has a duration other than instantaneous, it stops affecting the familiar if it moves farther than 5 feet away and will not affect the familiar again even if it returns to the master before the duration expires. Additionally, the master may cast a spell with a target of "You" on his familiar (as a touch range spell) instead of on himself. A master and his familiar can share spells even if the spells normally do not affect creatures of the familiar's type (magical beast).

Empathic Link (Su): The master has an empathic link with his familiar out to a distance of up to 1 mile. The master cannot see through the familiar's eyes, but they can communicate empathically. Because of the limited nature of the link, only general emotional content (such as fear, hunger, happiness, curiosity) can be communicated. Note that the low Intelligence of a low-level master's familiar limits what the creature is able to communicate or understand, and even intelligent familiars see the world differently from humans, so misunderstandings are always possible.

Because of this empathic link, the master has the same connection to an item or place that his familiar does. For instance, if his familiar has seen a room, the master can teleport into that room as if he has seen it too.

Deliver Touch Spells (Su): If the master is 3rd level or higher, a familiar can deliver touch spells for him. If the master and the familiar are in contact at the time the master casts a touch spell, he can designate his familiar as the "toucher." The familiar can then deliver the touch spell just as the master could. As usual, if the master casts another spell before the touch is delivered, the touch spell dissipates.

Speak with Master (Ex): If the master is 5th level or higher, a familiar and the master can communicate verbally as if they were using a common language. Other creatures do not understand the communication without magical help.

Speak with Animals of Its Kind (Ex): If the master is 7th level or higher, a familiar can communicate with animals of approximately the same kind as itself (including dire varieties): bats with bats, rats with

rodents, cats with felines, hawks and owls and ravens with birds, lizards and snakes with reptiles, toads with amphibians, weasels with similar creatures of the family Mustelidae (weasels, minks, polecats, ermines, skunks, wolverines, and badgers). Such communication is limited by the intelligence of the conversing creatures.

Spell Resistance (Ex): If the master is 11th level or higher, a familiar gains spell resistance equal to the master's level + 5. To affect the familiar with a spell, another spellcaster must get a result on a caster level check (1d20 + caster level; see Spell Resistance, page 177) that equals or exceeds the familiar's spell resistance.

Scry on Familiar (Sp): If the master is 13th level or higher, he may scry on his familiar (as if casting the *scrying* spell) once per day.

Master Class Level	Natural Armor Adj.	Int	Special
1st-2nd	+1	6	Alertness, improved evasion, share spells, empathic link
3rd-4th	+2	7	Deliver touch spells
5th-6th	+3	8	Speak with master
7th-8th	+4	9	Speak with animals of its kind
9th-10th	+5	10	--
11th-12th	+6	11	Spell resistance
13th-14th	+7	12	Scry on familiar
15th-16th	+8	13	--
17th-18th	+9	14	--
19th-20th	+10	15	--

From the Sorcerer Entry (page 54):

Familiar: A sorcerer can obtain a familiar. Doing so takes 24 hours and uses up magical materials that cost 100 gp. A familiar is a magical beast that resembles a small animal and is unusually tough and intelligent. The creature serves as a companion and servant.

The sorcerer chooses the kind of familiar he gets. As the sorcerer advances in level, his familiar also increases in power.

If the familiar dies or is dismissed by the sorcerer, the sorcerer must attempt a DC 15 Fortitude saving throw. Failure means he loses 200 experience points per sorcerer level; success reduces the loss to one-half that amount. However, a sorcerer's experience point total can never go below 0 as the result of a familiar's demise or dismissal. For example, suppose that Hennes is a 3rd-level sorcerer with 3,230 XP when his owl familiar is killed by a bugbear. Hennes makes a successful saving throw, so he loses 300 XP, dropping him below 3,000 XP and back to 2nd level (see the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for rules for losing levels). A slain or dismissed familiar cannot be replaced for a year and day. A slain familiar can be raised from the dead just as a character can be, and it does not lose a level or a Constitution point when

this happy event occurs.

A character with more than one class that grants a familiar may have only one familiar at a time.

From the Wizard Entry (page 57):

Familiar: A wizard can obtain a familiar in exactly the same manner as a sorcerer can. See the sorcerer description and the accompanying Familiars sidebar for details.

- For purposes of resolving **spells** and other effects, a familiar has **Hit Dice** equal to its own or equal to the master's **character level**, whichever is higher.

This effective Hit Dice total applies only when the familiar is subjected to some effect whose resolution depends on Hit Dice, such as *sleep*, *holy word*, *circle of death*, and the frightful presence special attack. The familiar does not gain any skills, improved **ability scores**, **base saving throw bonus**, **base attack bonus**, feats, or **hit points** from its effective Hit Dice (though being a familiar improves most of these things -- read on), nor does the familiar increase in **size**.

For example, a cat normally has 1/2 a Hit Die, and a *sleep* spell could normally affect eight cats (because *sleep* affects up to 4 Hit Dice worth of creatures). If a cat familiar has a 5th-level master, however, it effectively has 5 Hit Dice for purposes of how spells affect it and it is not subject to a *sleep* spell.

Temporary Hit Dice increases that the master gains (such as from a **bard's** *inspire greatness* power) don't increase a familiar's effective Hit Dice.

- A familiar's hit points are equal to one-half the master's hit points, rounded down.

The rules don't say so, but you can reasonably assume that a familiar uses its own hit points if they're higher than half the master's hit points.

Use the master's permanent hit point total when calculating the familiar's hit points. Include hit points from all the master's Hit Dice, including race and **class** Hit Dice. Include **bonus** hit points from the Toughness feat and from the master's permanent **Constitution** score. Do not add or subtract hit points from temporary changes to the master's Constitution score or temporary hit point boosts from spells such as *aid* or from effects that increase Hit Dice, such as the bard's *inspire greatness* power.

- A familiar's base attack bonus is the same as the master's.

As with hit points, use the master's base attack bonus from all classes and racial Hit Dice.

When attacking, a familiar uses the master's base attack bonus, its own relevant **ability modifier** (**Strength** or **Dexterity** as appropriate for the attack), plus the familiar's size modifier.

- A familiar uses its own **skill ranks** or the master's, whichever are higher.

A familiar is considered trained in any skill for which it has at least one rank. It also is trained in any skill for which the master has at least one rank. When both the master and the familiar have ranks in a skill, use only the highest number of ranks.

When making a skill check, a familiar uses its effective skill ranks, its own relevant ability modifier (as appropriate for the skill), plus the familiar's size modifier (if applicable), any applicable feats the familiar has, its racial modifier, and any synergy bonuses the familiar has from its effective skill ranks.

For example, a cat making a Hide check has a +4 racial modifier (+8 in areas of tall grass or heavy undergrowth), a +8 size modifier, and a +2 Dexterity modifier. A standard cat has no Hide ranks, giving it a +14 Hide bonus. If the cat is a familiar whose master has 2 ranks in the Hide skill, the cat gets the benefit of those ranks and its Hide bonus becomes +16 (+20 in tall grass or heavy undergrowth).

Special Traits and Features

Familiars have several abilities and traits that function only when the familiar is in fairly close proximity to the master, and a few more that function more or less all the time.

Many of a familiar's special abilities depend on the master's level. In this case, "level" is the master's class level in a class that can have a familiar. If the master has two classes that can have familiars, add the class levels together. For example, a human 10th-level **wizard**, 5th-level **fighter** has 10 levels for purposes of determining familiar's special abilities (because fighter is not a class that can have a familiar). The example familiar still has 15 effective Hit Dice for resolving effects that depend on Hit Dice, and the familiar's hit points, base attack bonus, base saving throw bonuses, and skill ranks still are derived from the master's total Hit Dice (15).

A 5th-level wizard/5th-level **sorcerer** also is level 10 (because both classes can have familiars). Such a familiar, however, has only 10 effective Hit Dice for resolving effects that depend on Hit Dice, and the familiar's hit points, base attack bonus, base saving throw bonuses, and skill ranks are derived from their 10 Hit Dice master.

Some prestige classes grant spellcasters extra spells or extra levels of spellcasting. Such classes do not increase a familiar's abilities unless they also include an ability to have a familiar.

Any **negative levels** the master accrues have no effect on the familiar. If the master actually loses a level, however, the familiar's abilities are reduced accordingly. A master does not lose an improved familiar (from the Improved Familiar feat) if the character's level drops below the minimum requirement to obtain the improved familiar, but the improved familiar still suffers the effects of the level loss on its familiar abilities.

Here's an overview of familiar abilities that are affected by proximity to the master or the master's level, or both.

- The familiar's natural armor bonus improves.

The table on page 53 of the *Player's Handbook* shows the increase. Add the value shown on the table to the familiar's normal natural armor bonus. For example, a standard cat's natural armor bonus is +0. A cat familiar with a 1st- or 2nd-level master has a natural armor bonus of +1.

This trait doesn't simply provide an extra **natural armor bonus**, it actually improves the familiar's racial natural armor bonus. Additional natural armor bonuses from items or spells, such as *amulets of natural armor* or *barkskin* spells stack with the natural armor bonus from this trait, as noted in their descriptions.

The natural armor bonus from this trait increases with the master's level, as shown on the table. The familiar gets the benefit of this trait for as long as it remains a familiar; distance between the master and familiar is not a factor.

- A familiar's **Intelligence** score improves.

A familiar has an Intelligence score of at least 6, or higher if the master's level is 3rd or higher, as shown on page 53 of the *Player's Handbook*. The threshold for humanlike intelligence is 3 (see page 9 in the *Player's Handbook*), so a familiar is as smart as a person, but not necessarily as smart as a brilliant person or even an average person. A familiar's minimum Intelligence score of 6 makes it smart enough to understand at least one language, usually Common (though it doesn't gain the power of speech until the master reaches 5th level). This allows the familiar to respond to fairly elaborate commands and undertake fairly complex tasks. As rule of thumb, a 1st-level master's familiar is capable of doing anything a preadolescent human child can do. As the master's level increases, so does the familiar's ability to follow orders and perform tasks.

A familiar does not learn new languages as its Intelligence increases along with its master's level.

A familiar uses its own Intelligence score if it is higher than what its master's level allows. A familiar can benefit from spells and effects that boost Intelligence, such as the *fox's cunning* spell. As with any temporary Intelligence increase, the Intelligence enhancement does not give the familiar any extra skill points or languages, but the familiar uses its new, higher, Intelligence modifier for Intelligence checks and Intelligence-based skill checks.

What's Next?

We're out of time for this week. Next week, we'll continue our overview of familiar basics.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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